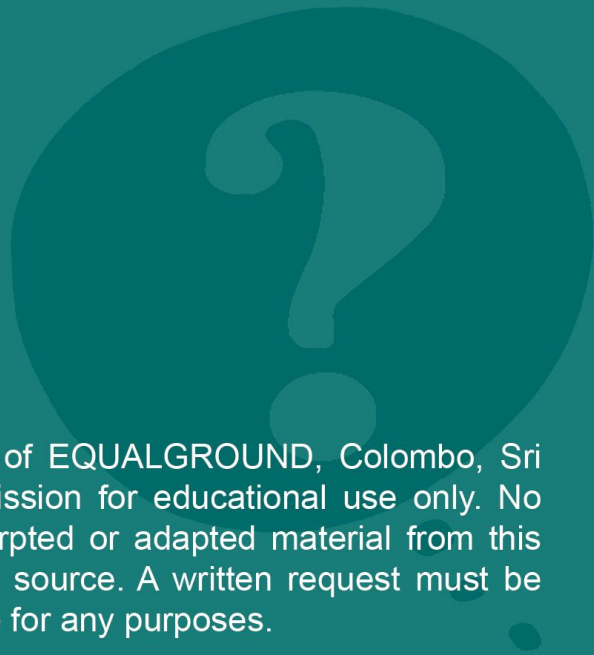


EQU  L GROUND

I MIGHT BE LESBIAN

An information booklet for young women



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What does it mean to be **lesbian**?

A Lesbian is a woman who is physically, emotionally and/or spiritually attracted to other women.

Lesbians are women who are sexually and emotionally attracted to women. Their feelings towards other women are normal and natural for them. Lesbians say they feel emotionally and spiritually closer to other women and prefer intimate relationships with women rather than men.

Experts estimate that about one out of 10 people may be lesbian or gay and many historically famous women were lesbians. Lesbians could be teachers, doctors, lawyers, factory workers, police officers, politicians, ministers, movies stars, artists, mothers, nuns, trucks drivers, models, and novelists.

Lesbians can be Sinhalese, Tamils, Burghers, Muslims, Christians, Buddhists and Hindus. Lesbians may be rich, poor, working class or middle class, young or old, in heterosexual marriages, abled or disabled.

How do I know if I'm a lesbian

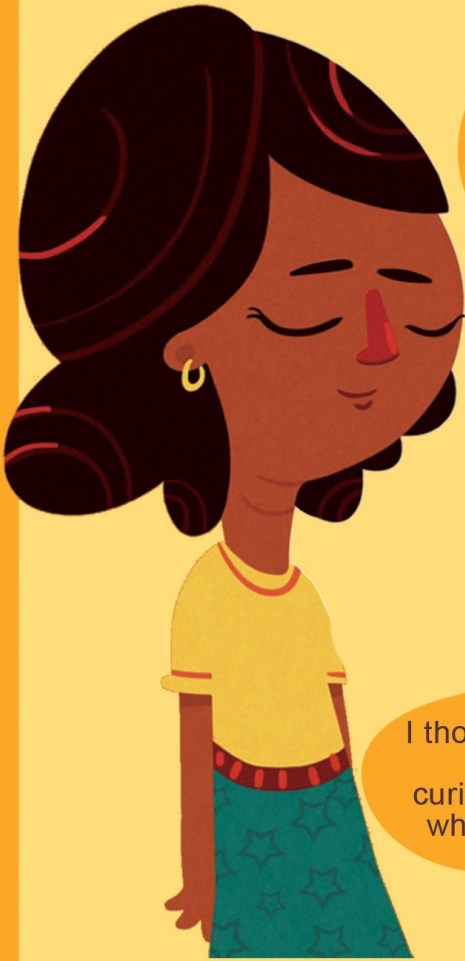
I have always been attracted to women. I remember having crushes on my school friends since schooldays although I didn't consider myself a lesbian. I didn't even know what a lesbian was. It didn't dawn on me until my late teens that ... I'm a lesbian.
Christine, 24

Well, knowing was never the question. It was accepting it that was. I started being attracted to girls at age seven, so I knew that I wasn't straight. It just took me a while to say to myself, I'm a lesbian and I'm okay.
Inoka, 22

During adolescence, most young women begin to be aware of sexual feelings and to take an interest in relationships. Most often, young women feel physically attracted to men. But other young women feel physically attracted to women. You may feel different from your girlfriends, like you don't fit in sometimes. When your girlfriends are checking out the guys, you may find that you are checking out other women.

Going out with men may not interest you. You may find yourself wondering, "Why aren't there any men like these wonderful women I keep meeting?" you may also feel confused or unsure about whether or not you are a lesbian. You may feel confused because you are attracted to both men and women, and that's okay. Some women have relationships with both men and women throughout their lives. Some women eventually decide to be exclusively lesbian or exclusively heterosexual. Sexuality usually develops over time, so don't worry if you aren't sure.

Am I Normal?



People focus on the sex part always. When you say lesbian that's what they picture. They don't understand that there is love involved, too. Whoever you fall in love with...that is normal sexuality.
Harshi, age 19

Normal is different for every individual. I cannot dictate someone else's life, body or anything else by my standards. I tend to laugh at people who are close minded. Also, I speak up when anyone makes the slightest homophobic comment.
Shyama 24

I thought I was different from others at a young age. At the age of 16 I got to know the word lesbian and was very curious to find out what it was. From the day I got to know what it was, I knew that I was a lesbian. I know I am very normal.
Mariam, 23

Yes, you are normal. Many people are lesbians. Many experts agree that a person's sexual orientation is determined at a young age, even as early as birth. It's normal and healthy to be yourself, whether you are gay or straight. What's really important is learning to like yourself.

What is it like to be young and lesbian?

It is so difficult sometimes and there are times I wish like anything that I was not a lesbian. But I am what I am...I can't change that. People can be nasty sometimes, but I just don't hang out anymore with people like that. I only hang out with my friends who I have told about myself. I know that I am doing nothing wrong and that I am normal.

Aruni, 20

It's had its ups and downs...But once you become aware of whom you really are and accept who you are its just absolutely fabulous!

Jayani, 21

At first I was very confused and afraid of what I was. I thought no one would like me if I told them I am a lesbian. But since I told Akki and she was cool with it, I feel so much better. Now my friends also accept me. And I am very happy about that.


Malathi, 24




There is no right way or wrong way to be a lesbian. Growing up with society's stereotypes about lesbians might make you think you have to be a certain way if you're a lesbian. Your sexual orientation is only one part of who you are. You probably have hobbies and interests that are the same as those of some of your straight friends.

Homophobia means some people don't accept lesbians and gay men, and lesbian and gay persons often suffer from discrimination and violence. That's why there are organizations such as EQUALGROUND that work for LGBTIQ¹ human rights.

What about HIV/AIDS?



I insist on safer sex. Despite the rumor that lesbians are indestructible, I'm not taking any chances. I always tell my partner, up front that I demand safer sex.
Shanaz, Age 23



My principle is, if you're not ready to talk about safer sex with your partner, then you're probably not ready to have sex. It's imperative to know the risks you may be encountering.
Sugi, 26

Everyone should know about HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, how it's transmitted and how to prevent infection.

You and your partner should discuss your risk factors and hers for HIV infection and decide what safer sex methods to use. Lesbians who are at risk are those who:

- Share needles if injecting drugs
- Having vaginal intercourse with men without using condoms (remember that it's fairly common for young lesbians to have sexual contact with men at least occasionally.)
- Having oral sex with an infected woman without using barrier protection.

Here's how to reduce your risk of HIV infection and other STIs.

- If you are injecting drugs, don't share needles.
- Don't use drugs and alcohol - it impairs a person's judgment and therefore can place you at risk.
- Communicate with your partner. You do not have to have sex.



- Choose activities that do not involve sexual intercourse – such as hugging, normal kissing, talking or texting.

- Use a dental dam or other latex barrier for oral sex. A dental dam is a square piece of latex about five inches on each side, designed for use in dental surgery. And available at dental and medical supply stores. A latex condom cut down the middle or plastic wrap can be effective.

- Use a latex barrier like surgical gloves when stimulating a partner with your fingers, especially if you have even the smallest cut or rash on your hands.

Always use a condom if you have sexual intercourse with a man.

How do I learn to like myself?

Talking to someone is the best help that I found. It makes you feel less alone. Movies, books and websites are helpful when there is no one to ask about stuff or when you're feeling down or embarrassed to talk about something.
Ranika, 26

It helps to learn to look inside yourself and to see that the gay part of your personality exists together with, not separate from and not in spite of, all other parts of yourself. Helps to see how everything you do or are is somehow affected by your sexual orientation. I often look back on everything that's happened and cannot imagine not being who I am.
Jayani, 22

Everyone needs to feel good about themselves. All people are equally valuable. Developing self-esteem is very important for young people, and it can be difficult for LGBT youth to feel good about themselves when many people around them believe that LGBT persons are sick or perverse. Feeling like you have to hide who you really are could make you feel like hurting yourself, taking senseless risks, using alcohol or other drugs or attempting suicide. You may feel isolated, fearful and depressed, especially if you've had no one to talk to about being lesbian. But, more and more young lesbians are learning to like themselves.

You can find help by reading good books by and about lesbians- books with accurate information about lesbians who are leading fulfilling lives or read about it online. You will then discover that lesbians are as diverse as any other group of people and that society is full of misinformation about lesbians.

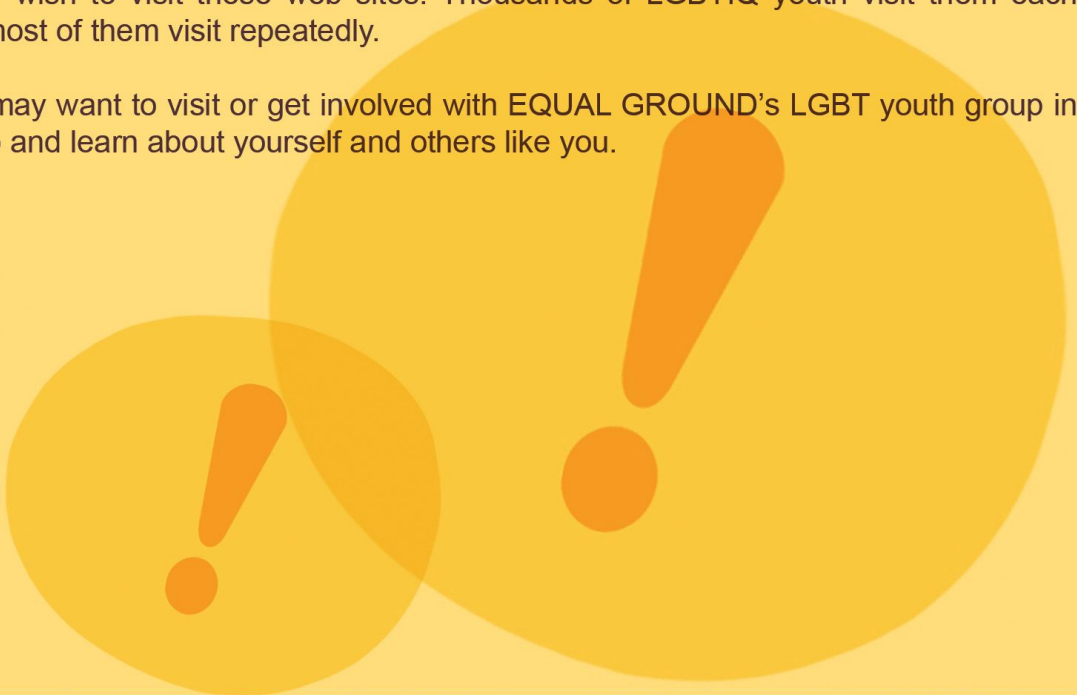
You can say to yourself every day, "I'm a lesbian and I'm okay".

Do you want to learn more?

In Sri Lanka EQUALGROUND affords sensitizing and educational programs for the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and Questioning (LGBTIQ) community. Log on the website at www.equal-ground.org or 'like' us on Face book (<http://www.facebook.com/EQUALGROUND>) or call us at 011- 5679766 or 011-5734530 (for LB women only). Alternatively, the internet provides a host of International organizations such as Advocates for Youth (<http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/>) who have web sites by and for young gay people. Others include Youth Resource (www.youthresource.com), IGLYO (<http://www.iglyo.com/>) and Stop Bullying now (<http://stopbullyingnow.com/lgbt-youth/>).

You may wish to visit these web sites. Thousands of LGBTIQ youth visit them each month; most of them visit repeatedly.

Or, you may want to visit or get involved with EQUAL GROUND's LGBT youth group in Colombo and learn about yourself and others like you.



Who should I tell?

The time in which each person decides to come out is completely up to him or her and should in no way be a decision made by someone else. Youth who feel the desire to talk with others about their feelings should find a place where they feel safe.

Shenuki, 20

The people who bring the most positive results from telling are just the people who accept it, and who don't only say it's okay, but show they mean it by the way they treat you.

Marie, 19



Coming out is the process of accepting yourself as a lesbian and figuring out how open you want to be about your sexual orientation. A lot of people are misinformed about homosexuality and LGBTIQ persons. They don't understand homosexuality and it may be hard to know who will listen and be supportive and who will be angry or disappointed about it. Some friends will accept you and others may not. They might even tell other people about your orientation without your permission. Coming out to people in your family can sometimes be quite difficult too. They might be supportive or they might be completely against it and there can be divided reactions from different members in your family. So, start slow. Choose a friend your age, a sibling, parent, or another adult such as, a social worker or a local counseling agency. It's important to talk with someone you can trust because it's not healthy for young people to have to keep a secret that weighs them down in their lives.

You may have tried using alcohol or other drugs to numb yourself against your feelings and your worries. You may have considered suicide. It is important to know that you are not alone. EQUAL GROUND operates the only LGBTIQ counseling phone line in Sri Lanka. They can assist you with identifying your feelings and offering you a way to release confessions and fear. They can be reached at 011-5734530 (for LB women only) Monday through Friday 9.30am to 5.30pm or via email at equalground@gmail.com. Your feelings and you are valuable and you have alternatives to drugs, alcohol and suicide. Don't deny yourself the right and the ability to live a normal, healthy and productive life.

Additionally, EQUAL GROUND has many publications such as "Stepping Out of the Shadows: for parents of children with alternate sexual orientations and gender identities" that can assist with educating and informing parents and others of your sexual orientation, if you wish to come out to them.

How do I find other
women like me?



I finally had the nerve to go to a LGBT youth group. I don't think I uttered even ten words for about a month. I was just in awe that there were people who felt just like me. It was wonderful thing. Shaniya, 20

Being a member of a community LGBTIQ youth group in your area is a great way to meet people, just like you.

EQUALGROUND offers young lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex or Questioning (LGBTIQ) youth the space to hold group meetings, share information and experiences and conduct workshops on pertinent subjects such as sexuality, gender based violence, human rights, HIV/AIDS etc. It also provides space for young LGBTIQ persons to conduct social outreach work in rural areas to encourage others like you to find each other. For more information, call or email EQUALGROUND.

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Human Rights for everyone”

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